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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA MANIPULATES PENZA REGION'S MASSES

REF: 07 MOSCOW 5268

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a recent visit to the Penza Region it was apparent that United Russia dominates the region to an extreme degree. Opposition forces, like the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and Just Russia have very little representation, or they were almost inactive, as in the case of Yabloko, Right Cause, and the Solidarity movement. United Russia has used its administrative resources to manipulate the masses while simultaneously clamping down on the media and human rights outlets. Rather than a flourishing democracy, silence and oppression reign in Penza. End Summary.

#### United Russia Dominates Penza

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¶2. (SBU) During a June 2-4 visit to the Penza Oblast, the dominance of the ruling United Russia party was palpable. In the March 2008 elections, United Russia swept all electoral areas. According to local party Chairman Victor Dolotov, United Russia dominated each district of the region and garnered a regional total of 96 percent of the votes, as well as 88 percent in the Penza City elections. KPRF and Just Russia each have a single deputy in the Penza Regional Duma, and KPRF and LDPR each have a seat in the Penza City Duma. The rest of the opposition entities, Yabloko, and newcomers Right Cause and Solidarity are not represented in the Penza Region. The governor and mayor are also from United Russia. Governor Vasiliy Bochkarev, in power since June 1998, was re-elected in April 2002, and then re-appointed by Putin in May 2007. Similarly, Mayor Roman Chernov is serving his second elected term. Dolotov surprised us when he admitted that opposition parties did not get many seats in the last round of elections because "people did not know anything."

#### United Russia Authorities Manipulate the People

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¶3. (SBU) Alexander Yakhontov, editor of The Peoples' World newspaper and a former editor of Novaya Gazeta, described to us on June 2 how United Russia manipulated the inhabitants of Penza through the use of the vertical power structure. On the highest rung, in January 2008, then-President Putin and First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev traveled to Penza and opened both a sports center and a medical facility. Yakhontov told us that this visit was just a tactic to garner votes for United Russia prior to the March 2008 presidential elections and that they dropped in to Penza for this staged event. Yakhontov argued that the United Russia Mayor Roman Chernov is a puppet and that the United Russia-backed Chair of the Penza City Duma, Ivan Belozertsev, holds the real power on the local level. He added that Mayor Chernov is also a puppet under Governor Bochkarev. According to Yakhontov, the United Russia deputies in City Hall are businessmen who obey the government structure since they

depend upon the tax service and other benefits. He also described to us how heads of large companies have been forced to join United Russia or face negative consequences in the workplace, such as the threat of losing their jobs.

¶4. (SBU) Semen Vakhshstein, Chief Editor of Ekho Moskvyy - Penza radio station, characterized the political situation as "absolute United Russia." He told us that the opposition parties were much stronger before, but United Russia has since marginalized them by using its administrative resources as a means of pressure. In 2002, for example, KPRF received 38 percent of the vote in the Penza Regional elections. KPRF Chairman Aleksey Ulin told us on June 3 that "United Russia dominates the region only because it falsifies the elections."

¶5. (SBU) Yakhontov cited his concern that the current political structure in Russia was similar to when the tsar in the Kremlin had representatives in regions who routinely obeyed and carried out orders. According to Yakhontov, the contemporary political structure is also a means of obeying; when people do not obey they lose their jobs. Yakhontov told us that there is no force or group of activists going against United Russia in Penza. Yakhontov further argued that civil society does not exist in Penza and that people are more concerned with consumerism than with their political freedoms. There is an overwhelming sentiment that individuals are unable to influence events.

¶6. (SBU) United Russia's Dolotov also manages the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation Penza Branch. During our visit to his facility, we were struck by how the United

MOSCOW 00001535 002 OF 002

Russia party and city merged together seamlessly and provided benefits to the elderly. We toured a United Russia-sponsored aerobics facility, a music and crafts creative area, and a relaxation room, all designed as places for pensioners to spend their leisure time--albeit under the influence of United Russia.

Lack of Free Expression

¶7. (SBU) According to the editor Yakhontov, there is no free press in Penza. Ekho Moskvyy's Vakhshstein told us that the local television channels are almost all the same and they also report on the same topics, such as auto crashes or the governor. Other than Ekho Moskvyy, there is only one other radio station, Radio Rossiya, which plays music and does not broadcast news. Yakhontov told us that Ekho Moskvyy has 15,000 listeners, but he admitted that he is not sure whether the station is actually influential. He told us that sometimes he encounters difficulties, such as during the elections when he was not allowed to talk about the candidates. The governor calls him frequently to question his opinion; he must meet with the governor to explain his views. Based on these meetings, Vakhshstein developed an understanding with the governor and he told us that their relationship is "fine" now. Vakhstein characterized Penza as having "partially free press." Vakhstein believes that the media situation has not been free in the Penza Region since 2002 when a journalist was murdered, seven were assaulted, and one was abducted.

¶8. (SBU) The Human Rights Ombudswoman, Svetlana Pinishina, could not provide any concrete information about human rights violations. However, Yakhontov maintained that there are frequently human rights abuses, but they are not reported openly. He told us that Solidarity maintains a list of abuses on its website. In the event of an abuse, however, it is extremely difficult and rare to bring about justice through a lawsuit. The police in the Penza Region are also known for applying force illegally.

Comment

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19. (SBU) The Penza Region is yet another example of United Russia's influence in the regions. With its firm grip on the citizens of Penza, United Russia can easily control them on behalf of the Kremlin. The Penza Regional government likewise restricted our visit, including program movement and interaction to such an extent that they threatened to cancel our independently scheduled meetings with Yabloko and Ekho Moskv representatives unless they were allowed to monitor them. During the evening when we met with Yakhontov over dinner in a public restaurant, as if on queue when he mentioned that the mayor was a puppet, a stocky man interrupted our meeting. We were subsequently encircled by four well-built men who tried to intimidate us as we negotiated our way to a taxi. While the "control" in other regions is common, the degree in Penza belied uncertainty and apprehension among the government and security service officials.

BEYRLE